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ABSTRACT

The study, based on data from the Phi Delta Kappa national study of 22,018 elementary and secondary students, investigated four questions: (1) what percentage of students enrolled in regular classes possess known categorical special education labels? (2) how many of these students could also be considered to be at risk for failure in school and/or life? (3) how often is special education used as an intervention strategy for at-risk students? and (4) how effective is special education as an intervention strategy? All students were enrolled in regular fourth, seventh, or tenth grade classes. The study found 2,179 students identified as special education students, of whom approximately 64% were categorized as learning disabled. Application of a scale of 45 factors contributing to risk showed that about 63% of special education students met the criterion of being at risk as contrasted to 22% of the regular education population. The data also indicated that principals (N=276) and teachers (N=9,652) view special education as one of the more appropriate and effective intervention strategies for use with at-risk students. Contains 11 references. (DB)

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Special Education and Students At Risk:

Findings from a National Study

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Paper presented at the Annual Convention
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Abstract

This article addresses the relationship between regular and special education students considered at risk. Data were analyzed from the national Phi Delta Kappa study of 22,018 students, 9,652 teachers, and 276 principals in 40 states and a Canadian Province. Approximately 64% of the special students were categorized as learning disabled. It would appear that the special students, all of whom were enrolled in regular classes, are at greater risk than other students in regular classes who do not possess a special categorical label. This was true for all special categories identified as well as for all grade levels assessed. The data also indicated that principals and teachers view special education as one of the more appropriate and effective intervention strategies for use with at risk students. This paradox poses more questions than answers as a greater number of special students are being placed in regular classrooms.

Special Education and Students

at Risk: Report From a National Study

A national study of at risk students was recently completed by Phi Delta Kappa International, a professional education organization whose major goal is to promote quality education. In this study at risk was defined as students who are likely to fail either in school or life. (Frymier, 1988). The study focused on four major questions: (1) Who is at risk? (2) What are they like? (3) What are the schools doing to help these students? and (4) How effective are the schools efforts?

The collaborative efforts of 87 local Phi Delta Kappa chapters from across the country were used to collect data on 22,018 students, 9,652 teachers, and 276 principals. In effect, each chapter was asked to complete a series of 13 jobs within a specified time frame. These included (1) forming a research committee, (2) selecting three schools representative of schools

in the chapter's area, (3) going through intensive training, (4) interviewing the principal from each school, (5) surveying the teachers of each school, (6) applying a "holding power" statistic in the high school, (7) writing a narrative report about each school, (8) collecting information about students in grades 4, 7, and 10, (9) doing a case study of a student considered highly at risk, (10) conduct an optional project, (11) analyzing the data from the optional project, (12) discussing data at a district level meeting, and (13) disseminating research results. For a complete description of the task procedures and assessment instruments see the Phi Delta Kappa At Risk Study Manual of Instructions (Frymier, 1988). In addition, a total description of the study and its global findings can be obtained through the Phi Delta Kappa monograph A Study of Students at Risk: Collaborating to Do

Research (Frymier, 1989). It is an optional project which forms the basis for this article. Specifically the authors were interested in answers to the following four questions: (1) What percentage of students enrolled in regular classes possess a known categorical special education label? (2) How many of these students could also be considered to be at risk? (3) How often is special education used as an intervention strategy for at risk students? (4) How effective is special education as an intervention strategy?

It should be noted that when the issue concerning special education and special students was raised prior to the Phi Delta Kappa national data collection, it was determined by the national project's steering committee that students identified as special were not to be counted unless they were enrolled in a regular fourth, seventh, or tenth grade. The instructions for the

researchers were to select "typical" students.

> ".....do not select students who are in special groups for inclusion in this study. Do not select students who have been assigned full-time to classrooms for the mentally retarded, for example. Do not select students who are assigned full-time to programs in alternative schools. Select "typical" students in the school." (Frymier, 1989, pg. 148).

It was determined on a less formal basis that if special students were assigned to regular classes, they would be counted and their information obtained. In addition, there were several questions related to special students and special education services within the assessment instruments, as well as demographic or personalized information derived from each student's cumulative folder. These data form the basis for

this study.

Special Education Population

The lines between students who fail in school and those identified as in need of special education are becoming increasingly unclear. As a general rule, special students enrolled in regular classes function at a higher level than their counterpart who attend special classes or special schools. However, they are also more likely to receive failing grades due to more difficult standards than those experienced in special class placement. According to Wetzel (1987) special education students were significantly more likely than nondisabled students to come from low income, single parent families with heads of households who have relatively little education.

Table 1 lists the number of students who were identified from the national project as being in a special education category.

They were all enrolled in either a regular fourth, seventh, or tenth grade class. As with the Butler-Nalin and Padilla study (1988), the vast majority (64%) were categorized as having a learning disability as their primary handicapping condition. Unfortunately, not all the traditional categories were identified due to limitations in the questionnaire format. For example, it would have been useful to determine how many of the "other" category were students identified as behavior disordered. A significant relationship between students with behavior disorders and an at risk population has been noted in other research (Cuban, 1989). The large number of educators in the national study who were unable to categorize their special education students has both positive and negative implications. If special education services are being made available by a noncategorical model, this could be a positive implication. If

the large number of "don't know" students are simply placed in regular classroom without a descriptive basis of their special needs, it could be quite harmful. The 1,604 students included in the "don't know" category are not included in the special student and regular student comparision in Table 3.

Insert Table 1 about here

At Risk Population

Prior to the data collection, the Phi Delta Kappa nationa study committee decided on their definition for "at risk" and on factors associated with being at risk. In general terms the committee defined "at risk" as the likelihood to fail in school and/or life. (Frymier, 1988). A review of over 100 studies was examined to verify the definition and to examine

conditions associated with the definition. These conditions included poor school performance, low self esteem, and behavior problems. These conditions were then operationalized into 45 factors. At the first training session held in Kansas City, November 1988, each chapter's research representative was requested to rank the 45 factors in terms of relative importance to at riskness. Following this determination, a weight was assigned each factor in direct relationship to the value afforded that factor. The weights ranged from zero to five, with five having the greatest weight. At the local PDK chapter level, members of the research teams met with either teachers or counselors for each student completing the "at risk scale." An at risk score was then computed for each student in the study. Table 2 lists the complete scale as well as the weights assigned. Although the at risk scale score must be considered

limited and experimental, it does represent a reasonable way to begin identifying students who may be at risk. The scale is based on factors identified by research, ranked by experienced educators, and weighted in a reasonable manner. Naturally the higher the score, the greater the student was considered to be at risk. It was originally determined by the Phi Delta Kappa National Steering Committee that a score of 13 or higher warranted considerable concern and clearly puts a student in the at risk category. This is the score used for comparision in the next section since it has greater validity than a score of six recently recommended by Frymier and Gansneder (1989). Regardless, it seems clear that the combination of factors which contribute to the at risk score may be just as important as the score itself.

Insert Table 2 about here

Special vs. Regular Education Population

It was determined by the Phi Delta Kappa national steering committee that a score of 13 or higher warrants concern and puts a student in the "at risk" level. Table 3 lists the scores and percentages for both the special education population and the regular education population enrolled in regular classes. A majority (63%) of the special education students had "at risk" scores of 13 or higher, while only 22% of the regular education students had scores in this range. A greater percentage of special education students were "at risk" in every "at risk" score category than were their counterparts in the regular education group. This finding was also true across grade levels.

According to the findings special education students enrolled in regular classes clearly are more "at risk" than other students in regular education.

Insert Table 3 about here

Strategies for Intervention

One question, asked both teachers and principals, has paramount implications for program purposes. It read "When you have students at risk, which of the following strategies do you regularly use? The respondents were also asked to indicate how effective they consider each strategy even if they did not use it regularly. Table 4 lists the strategies, use, and effectiveness as indicated by teachers and principals.

Insert Table 4 about here

Of the thirty prepared strategies presented to teachers and principals, notifying and conferring with parents was rated first and second by both groups. The use of special teachers and special education ranked relatively high. Principals tend to use special teachers and special education more as strategies than teachers. This is understandable since by the time an at risk student is referred to the principal his/her problems have usually escalated. Interestingly, all teachers responded to the effectiveness of use of the strategies. Principals were unsure or simply did not answer relative to the effectiveness of many strategies. Considering the key role most principals have on decision making teams, this finding has strong implications for reviewing program responsibilities for

"at risk students."

It does appear that the general principles associated with special education programs are highly utilized and considered effective by both teachers and principals. These included special teachers, individualized instruction, and interacting with parents. Yet twice as many students in the for special education population are still at risk. This paradox may have more to do with at risk factors which are traditionally beyond the school's control or responsibility. School personnel probably have little control over a parent's health problems, job security, or use of drugs. However, if the at risk cycle is to be broken, all students must develop appropriate health habits, learn useful vocational skills, and recognize the dangers assoicated with drugs and alcohol. They must also have greater input into their own program for

development. Interestingly, 86% of the teachers felt thinking skills should be emphasized as a strategy for at risk students, whereas only 20% of the principals agreed. Other large disparities between teachers and principals included computerized instruction, grade retention, low group placement, referrals to specialists, and the use of summer programs. Principals tended to use these more although they did not necessarily feel they were more effective.

A few comments must be made about the generic term "special education" being listed as one of the strategies. According to Public Law 94-142, special education is "specially designed instruction, at no cost to parents, to meet the educational needs of an eligible exceptional student to an approved program of study including classroom instruction and instruction in a special school or residential school.

Special education also means physical education, vocational education, or other curricular offerings when modifications are necessary to meet the individual needs of the exceptional student." (Federal Registrar, 1977).

Both teachers and principals rated special education as often used and relatively effective. One wonders how students, other than those categorized as eligible for special education, can currently be receiving special education services. Hopefully many of the components of special education are becoming incorporated into the regular classes. This position has been advocated by a number of researchers. (Reynolds & Wang, 1983; Will, 1986; Slavin, 1989). To keep or place special need students into regular classes without appropriate modifications may be compounding their at risk status.

Discussion

Although the Phi Delta Kappa national study did not directly address the relationship between special education and students at risk, it did provide some data on the subject which were used for this analysis.

A greater percentage of students who had a categorical label associated with special education and were enrolled in regular classes did have higher critical "at risk" higher scores than did other students. These high scores cannot be explained by their categorical label alone although the label could be considered a contributing factor. There were a rather large number of students whom educators knew were special education students but did not know their categorical label. This could be a reflection of the trend towards a generic classification of special needs students.

There were a number of discrepancies between what teachers and principals use and consider as effective strategies for at risk students. The most disparate were emphasizing thinking skills, retention in grade, and computerized instruction. These differences may be more a reflection of job responsibilities. For the most part, features associated with special education were considered effective strategies. These included smaller classes, special teachers, individualizing instruction, interacting with parents, and special education itself. Hopefully, a collaborative effort of regular and special education could provide a unified system for all at risk students regardless of the cause.

At their 1989 Bicentennial International Conference in St. Louis, Phi Delta Kappa designated "children at risk" as their number one priority. With this support, it is important that

special students be recognized as a very vulnerable part of that population. It should also be recognized that special education services may need to be expanded and better utilized.

No student should be denied services because he or she does not fit arbitrary eligibility criteria. As Wang et al. (1986), state "by providing regular education teachers with the necessary support system to educate all children successfully, we are strengthening our educational system as a whole."

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Table 1

Percent and Number of Special Education Students Enrolled in Regular 4, 7, and 10 grade Classes (N=22,018).

Category	N	%
Learning Disabled	1,401	6.4
Mentally Retarded	109	.5
Physically Handicapped	41	.2
Deaf	18	.1
Blind	7	0
Other	603	2.7
Don't Know	1,604	7.3

Table 2

Educator's Estimate of What Makes a Child at Risk (N=97)

Kansas City Training Session, November 1988

Index	Item	Value	Score
1	Attempted suicide during the past year	465.4	5
2	Used drugs or engaged in substance abuse	465.5	5
3	Has been a drug "pusher" during the past year	462.1	5
4	Student's sense of self esteem is negative	455.4	5
5	Was involved in a pregnancy during past year	450.6	5
6	Was expelled from school during the past year	443.3	5
7	Consumes alcohol regularly	441.0	5
8	Was arrested for illegal activity	438.1	5
9	Parents have negative attitudes toward education	437.1	5
10	Has several brothers or sisters who dropped out	432.1	4
11	Was sexually or physically abused last year	431.9	4

(table continued)

Index	Item	Value	Score
12	Failed two courses last school year	429.2	4
13	Was suspended from school twice last year	429.2	4
14	Student was absent more than 20 days last year	429.0	4
15	Parent drinks excessively and is an alcoholic	411.6	4
16	Was retained in grade (i.e., "held back")	403.1	4
17	One parent attempted suicide last year	399.7	4
18	Scored below 20th %ile on standardized test	397.0	4
19	Other family members used drugs during past year	389.0	3
20	Attended three or more schools during past five years	383.2	3
21	Average grades were below "C" last school	380.3	3
22	Was arrested for driving while intoxicated	364.9	3

(table continued)

Index	Item	Value	Score
23	Has an IQ score below 90	353.7	3
24	Parents divorced or separated last year	353.6	3
25	Father is unskilled laborer who is unemployed	346.3	3
26	Father or mother died during the past year	345.4	3
27	Diagnosed as being in Special Education	336.2	3
28	English is not language used most often in home	335.2	2
29	Mother is unskilled laborer who is unemployed	329.7	2
30	Lives in an inner city, urban area	321.7	2
31	The mother is only parent living in the home	320.3	2
32	Is year older than other students in same gr.	319.5	2
33	Mother did not graduate from high school	315.9	2
34	Father lost his job during the past year	305.8	2
35	Was dropped from athletic team during past yr.	296.2	2

(table continued)

Index	Item	Value	Score
36	Experienced a serious illness or accident	295.1	2
37	Does not participate in extracurricular act.	295.0	1
38	Parent had major change in health status	294.9	1
39	Had a close friend who died during past year	293.7	1
40	Had a brother or sister died during past year	288.8	1
41	Father did not graduate from high school	263.0	1
42	Changed schools during the year	262.6	1
43	Changed place of residence during the past yr.	253.3	1
44	Has three or more brothers and sisters	175.3	0
45	Is the youngest child in the family	157.7	0

Table 3

Special vs. Regular Education Population At Risk Scores

	AT RISK SCORES								
	13+		23+		29+		38+		48
Grade	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
	Regular Education Population (N = 19,839)								
4	1034	5.20	259	1.31	114	0.58	24	0.12	6
7	1326	6.70	465	2.34	239	1.20	87	0.44	35
10	1990	10.00	809	4.07	458	2.31	212	1.07	82
TOTAL	4350	21.90	1533	7.72	811	4.09	323	1.63	123
	Special Education Population (n = 2,179)								
4	396	18.17	150	6.88	79	3.63	31	1.42	2
7	513	23.54	223	10.23	119	5.46	42	1.93	17
10	463	21.25	254	11.66	166	7.61	77	3.53	28
TOTAL	1372	62.96	627	28.77	364	16.70	150	6.88	47

Table 4

Comparison of Teachers and Principals Use and Effectiveness of Various Strategies for at Risk Students Listed by Percentages.

	TEACHERS					PRINCIPALS				
	USE		EFFECTIVE			USE		EFFECTIVE		
STRATEGY	(Yes)	(No)	(Yes)	(No)	(No Response)	(Yes)	(No)	(Yes)	(No)	(No Response)
Smaller Classes	49	51	97	13	0	67	33	70	15	15
Computerized Instruction	23	77	50	50	0	50	50	47	29	24
Special Teachers	67	33	85	15	0	88	12	84	7	9
Peer Tutoring	63	37	81	19	0	58	42	55	25	20
Retain in Grade	44	56	48	52	0	71	29	26	60	14
Special Education	73	27	84	16	0	95	5	83	12	5
Vocational Courses	50	50	79	21	0	49	5	53	19	28
Alternative School	37	63	69	31	0	32	68	42	21	37
Special Study Skills	69	31	83	17	0	60	40	56	21	23
Special Textbooks	48	52	71	29	0	56	44	50	26	24
Place in Low Group	55	45	55	45	0	73	27	44	41	15
Emphasize Coping Skills	68	32	83	17	0	63	37	62	19	19
Flexible Scheduling	48	52	69	31	0	46	54	51	21	28
Individualized Instruction	79	21	91	9	0	79	21	74	13	13

(table continued)

STRATEGY	TEACHERS USE (Yes)	(No)	EFFECTIVE (Yes)	(No)	(No Response)	PRINCIPALS USE (Yes)	(No)	EFFECTIVE (Yes)	(No)	(No Response)
Home Tutoring	24	76	62	38	0	33	67	33	29	38
Extra Homework	23	77	26	74	0	28	72	16	52	32
Emphasize Thinking Skills	86	14	83	17	0	28	72	56	21	23
Restrict from Sports	33	67	38	62	0	51	49	34	40	26
Refer to Psychologist	60	40	71	29	0	82	18	61	27	21
Refer to Social Worker	54	46	70	30	0	72	28	49	35	16
Confer with Parents	94	6	81	19	0	99	1	74	24	2
More Time in Basic Skills	84	16	87	13	0	86	14	70	19	11
Eliminate Art & Music	6	94	9	91	0	2	98	5	51	44
Notify Parents	95	5	79	21	0	99	1	68	29	3
Chapter 1 Program	50	50	67	33	0	60	40	59	16	25
Teacher Aides	48	52	27	23	0	67	33	64	16	20
Say "Leave at age 16"	10	90	15	85	0	6	94	4	48	48
Before School Programs	23	77	47	53	0	16	84	25	30	45
After School Programs	42	58	63	37	0	44	56	43	26	31
Summer School Programs	56	44	71	29	0	71	29	58	25	17